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ABSTRACT

Viewing language learning in terms of the development of proficiency has important implications for the process of curriculum development in English as a second language. A proficiency-oriented curriculum derives not from an analysis of the language code, but from an analysis of target language behaviors. The interest is in both the product and the process of learning. One can determine the content of learning by identifying the educational, occupational, and interactional tasks learners need to perform in the target language. One can view the process of learning not as interlanguage development but as development of proficiency in functional task-related skills. The teacher, the syllabus, and the instructional materials assume a central role in teaching for proficiency since providing opportunities for proficiency development requires systematic needs analysis, task analysis, goal setting, and development and evaluation of teaching and learning activities. This is not to advocate a new movement or philosophy of language teaching, but to stress the importance of looking more closely at what language proficiency entails and how it can be addressed in the second language curriculum. A brief list of references concludes the paper. (Author/MSE)

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# PLANNING FOR PROFICIENCY

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## Introduction.

Language teachers and curriculum planners hoping to improve the relevance and effectiveness of their ESL programs in the 1980s can draw on a vast literature which reports the findings of at least twenty years of research, theory, and practice in second language education. We have seen the impact of different theories of the nature of language and language learning. We abandoned our structurally based view of language in the sixties and replaced it with theories of linguistic and communicative competence. Behaviourist learning theories were gradually replaced with cognitive and social-interactionist theories of learning. One consequence of the rapid change in paradigms has been a divergence of curriculum, syllabus, and method options. Curriculum planners can now choose between bilingual education or ESL program models, between structural or notional-functional syllabuses, and between grammar-based, acquisition-based, communicative, or humanistic teaching methods.

Despite these exciting developments, the precise relationship between language theory, learning theory and educational practice remains unclear. What is the role of teaching if language is "acquired" and not learned? Is a focus on grammar a legitimate component of a language program? If the teacher's primary role is to create opportunities for interaction

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and for negotiation of meaning, rather than to direct and organize opportunities for language practice, what is the role of the language syllabus? These kinds of questions, posed with increasing frequency by classroom teachers and teacher trainees, reflect a fundamental confusion that has emerged from much of the recent research, debate, and speculation. It is this confusion that we attempt to address in this paper. We will do so by reconsidering some very fundamental questions about the nature of language, language knowledge, and language teaching. These questions will be approached by focussing on the nature of language proficiency. First the concept of language proficiency will be re-examined and contrasted with competence, communicative competence and similar concepts. Then the implications of a proficiency-oriented view of second language learning for language curriculum development will be explored. Finally we will consider the basis for a proficiency-oriented curriculum, and the implications such a curriculum presents for language learning theory, curriculum development processes, and classroom practice.

## 1. WHAT IS LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY?

An understanding of the concept of language proficiency is fundamental to how we view the nature of language learning and teaching. In view of the vast literature on the nature of language proficiency, it might appear gratuitous to be offering a definition of language proficiency in 1985. Such a concept is so fundamental to the planning and practice of language teaching and testing as well as to research in second language acquisition, that one would expect little disagreement about what language proficiency refers to. Yet one observes a great deal of confusion on the part of researchers as to what this term means. According to Farhady, "language proficiency is one of the most poorly defined concepts in the field of language testing" (Farhady 1982: 44). A recent conference of experts convened to explore precisely what language proficiency is, considered that an issue of critical concern to bilingual educators was determining "what is the relationship between language proficiency and communicative competence?" (Rivera 1984: xix).

A plethora of terms have been generated in an attempt to elucidate the nature of language proficiency. Canale and Swain, (1980) following Hymes, distinguished between communicative competence and communicative performance. Widdowson in his recent book (Widdowson 1983) offers a distinction between competence and capacity. Bachman and Palmer (1984) refer to competence, skill, performance, linguistic performance, and communicative performance. Larson and Jones (1984: 114) demonstrate the extent of the difficulty in coming to grips with this term when they define language proficiency as "the ability to communicate accurately in whichever language modality is pertinent to the communicative requirements of the situation."

The following is an attempt at yet a further definition of proficiency.

1. When we speak of proficiency, we are not referring to knowledge of a language, that is, to abstract, mental and unobservable abilities. We are referring to performance, or that is, to observable and measurable behaviour. It is important to grasp the difference between competence and proficiency. Competence is well described by Widdowson:

> Competence, whether linguistic or communicative, refers to those aspects of human language behaviour that can be formalized in a model of description.... Competence refers to what the grammarian for methodological reasons represents as language knowledge.... (Widdowson 1983: 23.)

Whereas competence refers to what we know about the rules of use and the rules of speaking of a language, proficiency refers to how well we can use such rules in communication. Terms such as competence are categories for language analysis and linguistic description, whereas proficiency refers to the language user and what he or she is able to do in a language.

2. Proficiency is defined with reference to specific situations, settings, purposes, activities, and tasks. Proficiency is always referenced to the ability to perform real world tasks. Hence, we describe proficiency in such terms as "this child can read grade B reading material," or "this student can follow university lectures in English without difficulty" or "this person can carry on face-to-face conversation with a native speaker of English on simple everyday topics." Researchers have increasingly come to accept the view that proficiency cannot be envisaged as a single global capacity but can only be defined with reference to specific kinds of performance. The notion that a single unitary underlying ability could account for language proficiency has been abandoned: as Oller concedes

> [research] has demonstrated conclusively that there exists a plurality of factors underlying language proficiency. (Oller 1983.)

Cummins (1981) has stressed that proficiency in one modality does not imply proficiency in other modalities. A child may be reasonably proficient in oral skills, but lack the specific subskills needed to be successful in academic uses of language which cross other modalities (e.g., reading and writing). Cummins notes that "it takes considerably longer for immigrant students to develop age-appropriate academic skills (five to seven years length of residence) than it does to develop certain aspects of age-appropriate English communicative skills (approximately two years)" (Cummins 1981:9). Language proficiency is, hence, not a global factor but can only be

defined with reference to particular performance skills and behaviours in specified language modalities.

3. Proficiency also implies the notion of skill. It refers to the degree of skill with which a learner can perform a task. It is, hence, measurable along a continuum. It implies assessment according to criteria or norms as to what constitutes effective or appropriate performance of tasks. So we can say that "this learner reads well enough to be able to enter a graduate program," or "this child speaks and understands English well enough to be able to enter an English-medium classroom," or that "this learner does not write English well enough to be able to work as a clerk-typist."

4. Lastly, proficiency refers to the integration and application of a number of subskills in performing particular tasks. The ability to carry out particular tasks "proficiently" in a language requires calling upon and applying different components of linguistic and communicative competence. Different aspects of linguistic and communicative competence are drawn upon in different ways according to the kind of task the learner is attempting and the level at which he or she seeks to perform it. For example, the Foreign Service Institute Oral Interview Test of Speaking Proficiency takes five factors into account in determining a person's oral proficiency: accent, comprehension, fluency, grammar, and vocabulary. But the factors which contribute most to each level of proficiency vary. From level 0 to level 1, vocabulary is the most important sub-skill. From level 1 to 2, fluency, comprehension, grammar and vocabulary are the most important. From level 3 to 4, vocabulary, accent, and grammar are the most needed sub-skills, whereas to reach level 5, grammar and vocabulary are the crucial sub-skills (Adams 1980).

The Adams study demonstrates that grammatical skill is a component of proficiency but not the essence of proficiency. The contribution of grammar will depend on the kind of task the learner is performing and its interaction with other aspects of the task. A person may score highly on a grammar test, and yet be incapable of any kind of communicative language use. On the other hand, a person may be communicatively effective, that is, may be highly proficient in the use of English for certain kinds of purposes yet have very little control of major aspects of grammar (Schmidt 1983; Higgs and Clifford 1982).

To summarize, proficiency refers to the degree of skill with which a learner can use a language for particular communicative purposes. This view of language proficiency has a number of important implications for how we understand the nature of language teaching. It affects both our goals and objectives and the means we adopt to attain them. A proficiency-oriented language curriculum is not one which sets out to teach learners linguistic or communicative competence, since these are merely abstractions or idealizations; rather, it is organized around the

particular kinds of communicative tasks the learners need to master and the skills and behaviours needed to accomplish them. The goal of a proficiency-based curriculum is not to provide opportunities for the learners to "acquire" the target language; it is to enable learners to develop the skills needed to use language for specific purposes. Some of these may be educational tasks, such as study skills, or classroom reading and writing skills. Some may be occupational tasks, such as using English in a job interview, or on the factory floor. Others may be interactional tasks such as maintaining conversational small talk. Language itself is not the focus of the curriculum but is viewed as one of the means needed to realize non-linguistic goals.

These observations are self-evident and non-controversial. Yet the view that teaching English is equivalent to "teaching language" or that learning English is equivalent to "learning language" are persistent notions. Many applied linguists and language teachers continue to regard acquisition of grammar and development of proficiency as the same phenomenon. The view that language proficiency consists of mastery of the grammatical system surprisingly underlies much of the literature on second language acquisition. The bulk of SLA research has not investigated the development of language proficiency but rather the development of the learner's interlanguage. Thus researchers typically focus on how a particular feature of the target language system emerges over time. There is very little published research on how learners develop the abilities to use language for the accomplishment of particular kinds of educational, occupational, and professional tasks. Developmental or descriptive studies of reading, writing, speaking, and listening comprehension in educational or professional settings are few in the SLA literature.

The view of language teaching that emerges from a focus on language proficiency rather than language as the core of the language curriculum might be described as "criterion-referenced teaching." It is teaching that is accountable to specific kinds of proficiencies as learning outcomes. Such a view has implications for the approach we take to curriculum development processes, that is, for how we plan for proficiency. It is these implications that we will now consider.

## 2. LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AND CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT PROCESSES.

If we accept the development of proficiency as the primary focus of the language curriculum, implications follow for how we select and organize the content of instruction, the learning theories we refer to, and for how we plan and deliver our instructional goals. We will consider these in terms of task selection, learning theory, levels of proficiency, and methodology.

1. Task Selection and Syllabus Design.

A proficiency-based curriculum derives not from an analysis of the language code, but from an analysis of target communicative behaviours, that is, from an analysis of the tasks the learner will have to accomplish in English. This allows for the development of a syllabus that is planned around the performance of communicative tasks as outcomes (Long 1984). How can these be identified and incorporated into the curriculum development process? Needs analysis is initially required to determine the nature of these tasks, the settings in which they occur, the language modalities they involve, and the kinds of cognitive and communicative demands they involve. Educational tasks are derived from analysis of the classroom as a context for learning. Studies of second language learners in classroom settings (e.g., Cummins 1981) have emphasized the need to distinguish between interactional tasks and instructional tasks since they involve very different kinds of proficiency. Occupational tasks may be identified through the use of such procedures as participant observation and job component analysis (Pratt 1980; Jupp and Hodlin 1975).

Let us consider some examples of the form such analyses may take and the applications that can be made of them in curriculum development. An example of a task-based curriculum model that has been implemented nationally is the Malaysian Communications Syllabus (1975)--a syllabus for the teaching of English at the upper secondary level in Malaysia. The syllabus is organized around a specification of educational and occupational tasks. In the organizational schema three broad communicative objectives are broken down into 24 more specific objectives on the basis of needs analysis. The objectives include such things as "follow oral instructions and directions," "describe an object," "verbally or in writing explain and demonstrate a process or an experiment." These objectives are organized into learning areas for each of which are specified a number of tasks, cross referenced to processes. For example, the task labelled "relaying a message to others" in the syllabus can be broken into a number of processes such as a) understanding the message, b) asking questions to clear any doubts, c) asking questions to gather more information, d) taking notes, e) arranging the notes in a logical manner for presentation, and f) orally presenting the message. For each task sample situations are proposed in the syllabus as a guide to classroom activities. These situations consist of a set of specifications for learner interactions: the stimuli, communicative context, participants, desired outcomes, and constraints. These situations (and others constructed by individual teachers) constitute the means by which learner interactions and communicative skills are realized.

I have recently been involved in a different approach to task analysis in developing a curriculum for an English course for Japanese college students studying conversational English in

Hawaii. They need English not for educational purposes but for primarily social-survival purposes. Task identification involved the use of needs analysis to arrive at a specification of recurring situations where the learners use English in Hawaii, followed by identification of typical tasks occurring within each situation. The tasks were arranged in the syllabus according to Topics. Tasks to be accomplished within each topic are also specified. Tasks related to the topic of health, for example, include "describing a health problem to a doctor," and "finding out how to use medication." These together with proficiency specifications (see below) form the basis for developing classroom activities (Richards 1985).

It is not the case, however, that a task-derived curriculum is necessarily proficiency based. A case in point is the "Bangalore Project" (Prabhu 1983)--a project in India in which classroom activities involve different kinds of communicative or "procedural" tasks. The tasks, however, are not derived from any kind of model of language proficiency; they are not derived from a view of language as communicative behaviour. Rather they are linked to a conventional grammar syllabus and the project is designed to test whether such an approach is a more effective way of teaching a grammatical syllabus than a traditional grammar-focussed approach to teaching. The objectives of the program are, hence, not related to language proficiency, but to linguistic (in this case, grammatical) competence.

2. Learning theories.

What kind of second language learning theory is compatible with a proficiency-based view of language and language teaching? Most of the theorizing in the field of second language acquisition in recent years has been concerned with determing the nature of the cognitive and linguistic processes underlying second language development. As we noted above, the primary focus has been on the development of interlanguage systems. Targets for systematic investigation have been, for example, the development of negation or interrogatives. This led in turn to speculation about the kinds of internal processes that might account for the features observed in interlanguage data. One of the more powerful theories to emerge from this tradition has been Krashen's theory of second language development, which among other things emphasizes that language emerges naturally as a result of unconscious processes labelled acquisition. This theory deemphasizes the role of production and practice in language learning and stresses the importance of input features in determining language development.

As appealing as such a theory is, it is still primarily designed to account for language in terms of competence, i.e., to account for how abstract rules of the language system develop. A view of language as structure is basic to Krashen's theory.

Language learning is represented as the mastery of structures by stages.

> The input hypothesis states that in order for acquirers to progress to the next stage in the acquisition of the target language, they need to understand input language that includes a structure that is part of the next stage. (Krashen and Terrell 1983: 32)

Furthermore, Krashen's theory does not seem to go very far towards explaining how school-based learning actually occurs. Consider writing skills, for example, and how we learn such things as the rules of spelling and the conventions of punctuation, capitalization, and paragraphing. These rules are consciously instructed and thoroughly practiced in elementary school until their correct application becomes automatic. An understanding of how the ability to handle complex language tasks such as these gradually becomes automatic is basic to a theory of how we develop second language proficiency. A learning theory which is more appropriate to this view of language proficiency is to be found in the literature on information processing.

According to the information-processing theory of controlled versus automatic processing, learning any complex task or form of behaviour requires the integration of a number of subskills (see Levelt 1978). Initially in the learning process, many of these subskills require conscious attention. They are under the domain of "controlled processing" at this stage. In order to be able to handle recurring tasks and situations more efficiently, many of the underlying skills become routinized or automatic and are then generally performed without conscious attention. This is referred to as "automatic processing." This is fundamental to understanding the nature of proficiency development in language learning. In learning a particular skill such as writing, a great number of different levels of behaviour must eventually be learned, such as the complex rules required for control of written discourse at the level of word, sentence, paragraph and text. But our mental capacities can only handle a limited amount of information at any one time. How then do we deal with the complexity of such ordinary language tasks as writing a letter or engaging in face-to-face conversation?

As we become more practiced in performing these tasks, they require less mental energy.

> For learner drivers, handling an automobile and attending to traffic lights so fully absorb their mental capacity that they have none left over for anything else. Eventually one becomes practised enough that the routine requirements of driving take very little mental capacity and one is therefore able to converse, listen to the radio,

> or even, as some prodigies can do, compose prose by use of a dictating machine. (Bereiter and Scardamalia 1983:22)

Similarly Levelt observes:

> The acquisition of skill consists essentially of automation of low-level plans or units of activity. Initially the execution of such a unit of activity requires the allocation of large amounts of mental effort, since it has to be designed anew (like constructing an actual negative sentence in French from knowledge of the rules of negation). Repeated performance of the activity, however, leads to the availability of ready-made plans in long-term memory for such activities....The result of automation is that less and less effort is spent on lower-level patterns of action, so that more and more capacity is left for the higher level decisions. (Levelt 1978: 57-8)

From the information-processing perspective, learning is viewed as the transfer of schema, plans and operating procedures from short-term to long-term memory. The learner is viewed as gradually developing automatic control of the underlying plans for different kinds of language use, through practice. This model emphasizes production of language as an essential aspect of learning (cf. Littlewood 1984:74). Learners can make use of their own production to learn and can gradually improve their performance through practice. The role of teaching now takes on a different focus since its purpose is to provide opportunities for learners to develop the use of controlled processes in performing different kinds of tasks, and gradually to acquire automatic control or fluency, through practice. From the perspective of proficiency development, acquisition (defined as fluent control of target language behaviour) comes about through practising tasks and activities which are initially under the domain of controlled processing (McLaughlin 1979).

3. Levels of Skill.

So far I have made a case for a communication-based view of language proficiency as an essential concept in language curriculum development. The notion of tasks has been discussed as a basic unit in determining both syllabus content and classroom activities. However, while it is possible to describe proficiency in terms of the kinds of communicative tasks the learner should be able to perform in the target language, these can only serve as specifications of the objectives of a language program. Information is also needed on the degree of skill with which tasks are expected to be performed. Determining appropriate levels of performance for syllabus tasks is an

essential phase of curriculum development.

Traditionally in curriculum development, behavioural objectives served to specify both learning outcomes as well as the criterion to be attained for acceptable performance on tasks. For example, behavioural objectives for an ESP course for clerical workers might include the following:

> Given a letter with 10 proofreading marks for changes, the learner will rewrite the letter with 90% accuracy in 10 minutes.
>
> Given the first and last names of 10 persons, five with Spanish surnames and five with English surnames from a local telephone directory, the learner will locate the names and write down the telephone numbers in 5 minutes with 90% accuracy. (Findlay and Nathan 1980: 226)

However, examples of language programs in which objectives are specified to this degree of detail are rare, and until compelling evidence is forthcoming to demonstrate that the use of strict behavioural objectives improves the effectiveness of teaching, few of us will bother with spelling out program objectives in such detail. It is rarely a practical option.

An alternative procedure in language program development is to develop general descriptions of levels of proficiency which can be used in both program development and in evaluating learning. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages published provisional proficiency guidelines of this kind in 1982 which are described as

> a series of descriptions of proficiency levels for speaking, listening, reading, writing and culture in a foreign language. These guidelines represent a graduated sequence of steps that can be used to structure a foreign-language program. (Liskin-Gasparro 1984:11)

The ACTFL proficiency guidelines derive from work at the Foreign Service Institute on the assessment of oral language proficiency, and they are reported to have been developed empirically.

> These proficiency descriptions were developed empirically, that is, by observing how second language learners progress in the functions they can express or comprehend, the topic areas they can deal with, and the accuracy with which they receive or convey a message. The guidelines, then, are descriptive rather than prescriptive, based on experience rather than theory. (Liskin-Gasparro 1984: 37)

The guidelines are viewed as "a first step in creating proficiency-based curricula that respond to the need of the profession to define what students should be able to do with the language at various stages in the learning process" (Liskin-Gasparro 1984: 35). They have been embraced enthusiastically by the foreign language teaching profession as tools for refining objectives and designing curricula (cf. Higgs, 1984; James, 1985).

Outside the U.S. context a similar use of proficiency guidelines has been adopted in the Australian adult Migrant Education On-Arrival Program, a large-scale language program for immigrants in Australia.

> In order to ensure that a language program is coherent and systematically moves learners along the path towards that level of proficiency they require, some overall perspective of the developmental path is required. This need resulted...in the development of the Australian Second Language Proficiency Ratings (ASLPR). The ASLPR defines levels of second language proficiency at nine (potentially twelve) points along the path from zero to native-like proficiency. The definitions provide detailed descriptions of language behaviour in all four macroskills and allow the syllabus developer to perceive how a course at any level fits into the total pattern of proficiency development. (Ingram 1982: 66)

Despite the limitations of available proficiency descriptions, proficiency guidelines are proving useful components of proficiency-referenced language curriculum (cf. Freed, 1984), enabling appropriate levels of performance to be established for the different stages of a language program. Problems yet to be resolved with the ACTFL proficiency descriptions include the lack of adequate discrimination between levels and the fact that such descriptions are often expressed negatively rather than positively. Hence, particularly at the lower levels, they tend to resemble profiles of incompetence rather than proficiency. Research on differences between skilled and unskilled learners performing specific kinds of tasks might enable existing proficiency descriptions to be refined. A number of researchers in recent years, for example, have examined differences in reading and writing behaviours of learners at different levels of proficiency (e.g., Heuring, 1984; Hosenfeld, 1984). Such studies may ultimately allow us to construct profiles of how second language learners develop skill in performing core reading, writing, listening, and speaking tasks.

4. Proficiency, Methods, and Methodology.

What role does methods play in a proficiency-based curriculum? To answer this question it is necessary to distinguish between "methods" and "methodology." Methodology refers to the role of pedagogic tasks, activities and procedures, selected on the basis of program objectives and learning theory, in building up fluency in particular aspects of proficiency. Activities so selected are accountable to learner needs and to proficiency outcomes and are evaluated according to how well they contribute to development of specified kinds of proficiency. The development of methodology within curriculum development is, hence, a dynamic process. A "method," on the other hand, such as Silent Way, Suggestopedia, or Total Physical Response, is a rationale for a generally predetermined set of instructional techniques, practices, and language content. Generally, methods are neither needs-based nor proficiency-referenced. They typically reflect a particular perspective on the nature of language and of language learning, more often than not a traditional grammar-based view of proficiency. A method such as Total Physical Response, for example, (Asher 1977) clearly reflects a grammar-based view of language learning. Asher states that "most of the grammatical structure of the target language and hundreds of vocabulary items can be learned from skilful uses of the imperative by the instructor." Language learning is still viewed primarily as the learning of structure. Gattegno's Silent Way (Gattegno 1976) likewise reflects a grammar-based approach to the organization of teaching. Students are presented with a grammatically-sequenced introduction to the structural patterns of the target language and learn the grammatical rules of the language through largely inductive processes.

Neither in these or any other of the "innovative" method options currently available is there a clear focus on proficiency-based learning outcomes. The emphasis is on knowledge of the language rather than what the language is to be used for. Objectives are vague if they are specified at all. From a curriculum-development perspective it is impossible to take the claims of a method seriously unless we know exactly what aspects of language proficiency it seeks to develop. Given a specification of objectives and evidence of the kinds of proficiency gains the method has been shown to produce in specific kinds of learning tasks, the program planner can compare the degree of fit between the method and his/her program goals. However, methods promoters typically fail to provide any kind of information on the specific kinds of proficiency their methods address. A teacher wishing to employ a brand name method such as Counseling Learning or Silent Way typically has to try to infer specific objectives or proficiency outcomes from the techniques and materials which constitute the method. Not surprisingly, a learner who enters a language program because he or she has an immediate need for basic conversational skills in social survival situations or for occupational purposes may be frustrated if the

teacher following the dictates of a method directs the learner to talking about colored rods and building blocks, organizes the class in terms of pair work involving drawing of pictures and completion of maps, or conducts the class as what appears to be a physical education lesson. Packaged methods typically ignore the processes of curriculum development, fail to focus on learner needs or relevant proficiency outcomes, and are consequently irrevelant to the broader purposes of curriculum development.

CONCLUSION.

Viewing language learning in terms of the development of proficiency has important implications for the processes of curriculum development. In a proficiency-oriented curriculum we are interested both in the what and the how of learning, in both product and process. We can determine the content of learning through identifying the educational, occupational and interactional tasks which learners need to perform in the target language. We can approach the process of learning through viewing second language acquisition not as interlanguage development but as the development of proficiency in functional task-related skills. The teacher, the syllabus, and the instructional materials assume a central role in teaching for proficiency since providing opportunities for proficiency development requires systematic needs analysis, task analysis, goal setting, and development and evaluation of teaching and learning activities. This is not to advocate a new movement or philosophy of language teaching, or to suggest a search for new methods or gurus, but simply to stress the importance of looking more closely at what language proficiency entails, and how it can be addressed in the second language curriculum.

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